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10th Anniversary of September 11, 2001: Tips for Educators

The 10th anniversary of the September 11th attacks is a significant event for the United States. Most people will focus on remembering those who died, honoring those who keep the country safe, and reflecting on the country's resilience. Indeed, the anniversary offers a good opportunity to reinforce children's natural resilience and coping skills. However, some students may be at risk of an *anniversary effect*—the experiencing or re-experiencing of strong feelings related to the attacks.

Extensive media coverage of the anniversary and memorial dedication will likely include footage of the attacks. Many children will be seeing these images for the first time. For others, a renewed focus on the tragedy can bring back the feelings they had when it occurred. This is particularly true for individuals who were personally impacted by the events. Additionally, greater attention to this frightening time for the country may contribute to an already heightened sense of anxiety related to our continued state of war, the troubled economy, and the recent rash of natural disasters.

How schools choose to mark the events can shape the effect of the experience. Remember that adult reactions greatly shape those of children. How you present information can affect how students interpret the situation. The following suggestions can help school staff best meet the needs of their students and school community.

1. **Don't underestimate the anniversary effect.** While most people are engaged in a normal routine, be prepared in case students (as well as you or your colleagues) experience a surfacing of emotions. Expect a broad range of reactions, the intensity and nature of which will vary depending on an individual's personal history and relationship to events. Many students will exhibit little to no change in emotion or behavior. Some may experience feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, or grief. Related symptoms may include disruptive behavior, reduced concentration, heightened volatility or sensitivity, withdrawal, and more. In most cases, symptoms are normal and will subside with adult reassurance and support.
2. **Identify vulnerable students.** The degree to which children are affected will vary depending on personal circumstances. Most vulnerable are children who:
 - Live in proximity to past traumatic events or high target areas.
 - Have suffered a personal loss from or been exposed to terrorism, violence, or military actions.
 - Have parents currently in the military or on active duty in the reserve forces.
 - Have parents involved in emergency response or public safety.
 - Have families in a vulnerable financial situation.
 - Are of non-U.S. origin and may feel threatened by intolerance or racism.
 - Suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, or other mental illness.
3. **Let students' needs guide your approach.** Anniversary activities should reflect students' emotional and psychological needs. Schools with no significant connection to the attacks or related events, such as the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, will typically require fewer preparations than schools whose students were or are more directly impacted. Assess the stressors that your students might be under as well as indicators such as behavior problems, substance abuse, suspensions, drops in grades, absenteeism, and others.
4. **Determine whether a memorial activity is needed.** Memorials allow people to come together to express their feelings, increase a sense of security, and reduce a sense of isolation and vulnerability. **However, they will not be needed in all schools.** Providing a memorial activity for students who do not need it may increase their threat perceptions. Conversely, not providing such activities denies students who need them a venue for dealing with their anniversary reactions.

5. **Encourage broad participation in planning.** Decisions about how to approach the anniversary should include teachers, school mental health professionals, support staff, parents, and students. Encourage parents to communicate any concerns they may have about their child's reaction to the anniversary. All members of the school community should be kept informed of plans and resources if students need extra support.
6. **Caution against excessive exposure to negative images.** The media is likely to dramatize the anniversary. Many students, particularly elementary and middle school students, will be seeing these events for the first time. Watching replays of the attacks or stories about national security, the ongoing wars, or even the economy can raise anxiety levels. Young children in particular cannot distinguish between images on television and their personal reality. Older children may want to watch the news; class discussions about what they see can help put it into perspective. Also, encourage parents to monitor Internet and social networking activity.
7. **Reassure students that they are safe, as necessary.** For students who seem anxious, remind them (within an age-appropriate context) that adults are doing everything possible to protect the country and work toward a safer, more stable world. Young children need to know that their parents and other significant adults are okay and will keep them safe. Older children can understand that there are no guarantees in life but that the chances of something happening to them are remote. Review your school's safety plan. Remind them that our governments are working to improve prevention of and emergency response to terrorism and disasters. Don't try to serve as a mental health professional unless you are trained to do so. **Be clear on how to obtain mental health assistance for your students who need it.**
8. **Emphasize the positive.** Consider activities that focus on the empowering effects of the experience, such as a stronger sense of community, increased civic activism, the desire to help others, an appreciation for the rights and responsibilities of American freedom, and more. Remind them that the country has weathered many other crises, including terrorism, natural disasters, and war, and has emerged stronger and more united each time. Also, focus on important, positive issues such as tolerance, conflict resolution, and global awareness.
9. **Focus on students' resilience and competencies.** Talk about the positive things they can do to maintain a sense of control, such as reviewing safety skills that they have learned, spending time with friends and family, helping out at home, working harder at a favorite sport or hobby, or doing volunteer work. Help them identify what they have done in the past that helped them cope when they were anxious or upset. (See *Fostering Resilience and Optimism* at <http://www.nasponline.org/9-11-anniversary>.)
10. **Make time for class discussion (or activities if the children are young).** Be sure to have a map or globe. Be prepared to answer questions factually or to guide discussion about difficult issues. Be careful of large group discussion about political issues or war if your students have strongly differing opinions. Such discussion can turn adversarial when emotions are running high. Be mindful of the pressures your students may be feeling in other areas of their lives. Small group discussions may be more effective.
11. **Help students explore and express their opinions respectfully.** Explain that opinion is not the same as fact. Fact is what actually happens. Opinions are how we feel about what happens. Everyone has a right to their opinions, and discussing different views can deepen student's understanding of the world. Addressing the intolerance that leads to conflict and aggression can help students gain perspective. Have students avoid stigmatizing statements like, "War protesters are wimps," or "People who believe in war are idiots." Encourage students to state their beliefs with opening phrases like, "I believe or I think" instead of "It is" or "You should."
12. **Encourage healthy habits.** Remind students to get plenty of sleep, good nutrition, and exercise, particularly since they are also adjusting to being back at school. If possible, integrate healthy snacks and physical activity into the curriculum. Reinforce substance abuse prevention activities.
13. **Monitor your own reactions.** You may also be affected by the anniversary. Students may look to you for guidance and gauge their current situation based on your reactions. Maintain a supportive and optimistic demeanor. Young children, in particular, will react to any distress you exhibit. Your actions at all times should convey that students are in a secure, stable environment, and that school is functioning normally.